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# Artists, Shamans and Cosmology

**Instructor**

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**Institution**

Alfred University  
 A small comprehensive university with private sector Liberal Arts and Sciences, Business, Engineering Colleges and public sector (SUNY) College of Ceramics with Schools of Art and Design and Ceramic Engineering.

**Course Level and Type**

This is a seminar course, usually taken by juniors and seniors. About 1/4 of the students are Comparative Cultures Majors and about 1/2 are students from the School of Art and Design. The requirements for the course are either a previous course in religious studies or the Philosophy of Art course.

**Hours of Instruction**

56 hours, 4 hrs/week over 14 week semester. The class meets for a two hour period twice a week.

**Enrolment and Last Year Taught**

Course taught once a year. Regularly enrolls between 18-22 students. 20 students Spring semester 1998.

**Course Description**

This seminar explores how cultural worlds of meaning arise by examining artists and shamans who are involved in their constructions. We will focus on the cosmogonic process of creating meaning through visions, images, metaphors, ritualizing, gesturing, balancing, language, rhythm, space etc. We will also consider the relationship between material culture and the construction of meaning in various cultures.

As an upper division seminar, the course requires serious commitment and active engagement. Ideas will emerge from discussion and it is therefore essential that students come to class well prepared to discuss the assignments. Generally, we will be exploring how cultural worlds of meaning are created. Since both Western artists and traditional religious specialists such as shamans are involved in creating and maintaining worlds of meaning, we will explore the similarities and differences in the two enterprises with a goal to understanding the creative process itself.

**Required Books**

Note: A xerox packet is being sold at cost for \$6; It not only includes a few essays, but also a book *The Life and Times of Maria Sabina*, which is currently out-of-print.

Barbara Myerhoff, *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians*

Ronald Grimes, *Marrying and Burying*

Maureen Korp, *Sacred Art of the Earth*

Micki Hart, *Drumming at the Edge of Magic*

Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Voudou Priestess in Brooklyn*

John Lame Deer, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*

## Topics and Reading Assignments

Note: "**JD**" means "Journal Due"; It should center on readings, class discussions and videos that **precede** the "JD." Turn in on Shelf opposite my office on second floor of Kanakadea Hall.

### A. INTRODUCTION

Jan. 20--Video, "My Dinner with Andre"

### B. COSMOLOGIZING: RITUALIZING BY SHAMANS AND ARTISTS

Jan. 22--"A Huichol Myth" (handout); Myerhoff, pp. 29-111

Jan. 27--Myerhoff, pp. 112-188; Film: "To Find Our Life"

Jan. 29--Myerhoff, pp. 189-264; **JD#1: Feb 2**

Feb. 3--Article on J. S. Boggs from New Yorker

Feb. 5--Grimes, pp. 1-102

Feb. 10--Grimes, pp. 103-190

Feb. 12--Grimes, pp. 191-259; **JD#2: Feb 16**

### C. COSMOLOGIZING: COMMUNITY, NATURE, AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Feb. 17--Brown, pp. 1-139

Feb. 19--Brown, pp. 142-257

Feb. 24--Brown, pp. 260-381; **JD#3: Feb. 27**

Feb. 26--Korp, pp. 15-50

Mar. 3--Korp, pp. 51-102

Mar. 5--Korp, pp. 102-146 ; **JD#4: Mar 6**

### D. COSMOLOGIZING: RHYTHM AND BALANCE

Mar. 17--Hart, chs. 1-6

Mar. 19--Louise Steinman, "Proprioception" and "The Storyteller" From *The Knowing Body*, pp. 11-21 & 103-112; Hart, chs. 7-9

Mar. 24--Hart, chs. 10-14; **JD#5: Mar 30**

## E. COSMOLOGIZING: SYMBOLISM AND LANGUAGE

Mar. 26--Levi Strauss, "Sorcerer and His Magic" and "Effectiveness of Symbols (Packet) from *Structural Anthropology*

Mar. 31--Maria Sabina, pp. 31-100 (read endnotes also) (packet)

Apr. 2--Maria Sabina, pp. 105-115 (packet); **JD#6: Apr 7**

Apr. 7--Video: David Frost interview with Maya Angelou

Apr. 9--J. Gilmour, "Representation and Truth" & "Creativity and Truth" (handout from *Picturing the World*); Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt" (from *Sense and Non-Sense*) **JD#7: Apr 15**

Apr. 14--Discussion of Experiential Component--Silence or Ritual Walk

## F. COSMOLOGIZING: VISIONS AND DREAMS

Apr. 16--Lame Deer, pp. 1-143

Apr. 21--Lame Deer, pp. 144-202

Apr. 23--Lame Deer, pp. 203-255

Apr. 28--Video, Kurosawa's "Dreams"; **JD#8: Apr 30**

## Course Requirements

### A. Experiential Component

Choose **either** of these projects. We will discuss these experiences on April 14, so they must be **completed** before that class. There will not be a separate grade for the component, though the seriousness with which you take the component may affect the other grades in the course. It should be treated as equivalent to reading and discussing one section in the course. Many students have found it very beneficial to do both. (These exercises were originally devised, at least in part, by Maureen Korp; my thanks are extended to her for sharing them.)

1. Keep a strict silence for 48 hours sometime between March 17 and April 13--no talking, no singing, no humming, no whistling. Otherwise you should go about your normal routines of playing sports, going to classes etc. You will obviously need to prepare friends, professors, families etc. that you will be keeping silent. You probably should have some printed explanations to hand out to friends (e.g., "I'm taking this nutty class and have to keep an absolute silence for 48 hours. I will be able to talk again at 2 p.m. on April 10.")

**OR**

2. Establish a fixed walking route that takes you to a special place. The round trip should be at least 15 minutes, and you should spend additional time at the spot. You must take the ritual walk at least 15 times, spread out over at least 5 weeks between January 27 and April 13. You should do this without headsets. You should do some interactive action between yourself and the environment at the special place; you need not do the same thing each time at the spot (you may repeat the interactive action, build upon it, or do something different). You should try to reduplicate as precisely as possible the speed and actions along the route **to** the site. (If you stop to rest at a particular spot, you must stop and rest at the same place every time in the future. If you whistle a tune at a particular spot, you must whistle the same tune at the same place in the future--you may add things, but you may not subtract them. So be careful about introducing any new actions along your route that you may not want to have to repeat.)

NOTES ON **BOTH** EXERCISES: Keep a small notebook to note your experiences over the duration of the exercise. Note whatever you think you may have learned/understood better about cosmologizing in those notes. When you complete your exercise, write two or three paragraphs about the experience and **insert them in the journal.**

#### B. Seminar Participation--1/3 of grade

Attendance and participation are an essential part of this course! The quality of any seminar depends on those participating in it. All of us participating in the seminar must commit ourselves to reading the assignments and thinking about them before the class period when they will be discussed. Judgment on the grade will be made on 1) attendance, 2) quality of expression, 3) quality of listening to others, and 4) regularity of participation without always dominating the discussion.

#### C. PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL--1/3 of grade

1. Each student will keep an **up-to-date** journal of reflections on the readings and on the class sessions. The journal must be kept in a loose-leaf binder that will hold regular 8 1/2" X 11" sheets of paper. I require the **lightweight** paper folders with pockets. All entries must have **wide margins** on one side of paper for my comments and dialogue with you. You need to do **all** eight entries. Turn in on shelf opposite my office **by 4 p.m. of date due.**

2. Each entry should normally be focused around a single theme or line of thought. It **must** reflect the **readings** that **precede** the "JD" in the topic's section above. (You do not need to deal comprehensively with every reading, but must bring the relevant readings to bear on the theme or topic you choose.) You will probably want to consider the videos and class discussions in the period when you write the entry.

3. Each journal entry should be about 2 pages long. The due dates are listed on the schedule above and should be met. (Only very serious reasons should necessitate asking for extensions or excusing late entries.) Students who get behind in their journals do not do as well in understanding the material in the course as those who keep up. It is far better to occasionally write a mediocre entry than to get behind. (Note: "JD" is after the last assignment that is expected to be taken into account when writing the entry.)

#### 4. THE NATURE OF A PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL:

An entry in the journal is somewhere between a formal short paper and a diary-like, spontaneous thought. It is unlike a finished paper because issues may be left dangling and uncompleted--perhaps you will return to the issue in subsequent entries, relating it to new contexts. It is unlike a diary entry, because it is careful reflection rather than short spontaneous ideas. You are expected to work through an idea, turning it over, seeing its ramifications and limitations. It is both "unpacking" an idea and "fleshing it out." (A

metaphor from painting that might be helpful is "the careful sketch" rather than the "completed picture.") In the first couple of entries you should be concerned with **understanding** the major concerns of the course and with **developing** your questions that relate to the course. As the seminar proceeds, you may begin to play with some of the answers to your concerns and intellectual questions. But **remember** that all answers that are profound will raise more questions than they will answer. The more you understand the limitations of your answers, the more interesting will be your journal.

5. Grading--I will not grade individual entries, but will judge the entire journal after you turn in the final entry. The progress and development of your thinking throughout the semester are as important as the quality of thought in individual entries. You will have plenty of feedback on each entry that you write and will have a general idea about how well you are doing. Don't hesitate to request a conference with me to discuss your progress at any time. **NOTE: The entire journal is due, Thursday, April 30, by 4 p.m.** (It will be graded and returned by 10:30 a.m. on Monday, May 4.)

D. A 6 to 8 page paper--1/3 of grade

You are asked to write a paper, drawing from much of the reading material in the course, on **one** of the following topics:

1. Drawing upon 4 or 5 of the cosmologizers that we have studied this semester, explain how Wallace Stevens' poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" characterizes the cosmogonic process.
2. Choose a contemporary artist--poet, sculptor, painter, actor etc.--and explain how his or her life and/or work illustrates the cosmogonic process as represented by other cosmologizers whom we have studied this semester.
3. Drawing upon much of the material in this course, explain the characteristics of a cosmologizer.

**DUE DATE: By noon on Friday, May 8.**

Notes: The point of writing this paper is to draw together the ideas and readings in the course around the topic of cosmologizing. This is not a research paper. If you choose topic 2 above, use someone with whom you are already very familiar as the cosmologizer who will help you to organize the course material. Use footnotes for any material that was not part of the course. Put author and page numbers in parenthesis for material that you refer to that was in course. Type and double-space your papers.

## **Pedagogical Reflection**

The course is primarily discussion. Sometimes the discussion of the readings and topics begin through some carefully chosen questions by instructor. (I think this is essential preparation of instructor for a seminar course, even if used as backup.) Sometimes the discussion is initiated by instructor reading a portion from one or two students' journals (with their permission, of course). Sometimes the discussion is initiated through a more general question: "What issues did you find significant in the reading?"

The journal assignment is critical for this course--in fact, I use it in any seminar course that I teach. I think it really helps students to read an assignment, if they have some focus--or an interesting question that they are trying to answer. The journal helps give them that. I write a lot in margins and at end of an entry--I actually enjoy using this as an opportunity for an intellectual dialogue with students. I return the journals promptly (the next class) and sometimes choose to read from them. This often gives confidence to someone who has insights, but is a little reluctant to share them with the class. Colleagues always ask me if I have trouble "grading" journals--it is 1/3 of grade in the course. Actually I find this the easiest assignment to grade, because one can tell how much effort students are putting into the reading etc. If people write a general entry on a topic that


comes out of class discussion, I'll frequently conclude with something like this: "Good entry because it shows creative thinking about this topic, but try to draw some insights from the reading. For example, you might have used this example from \_\_\_\_\_ to flesh out the issue you're dealing with."

The two experiential choices are designed to help the students understand the relationship between altering perceptions and seeing underlying patterns. The New Yorker article on J.S. Boggs opens up this issue--he is an artist (perhaps best thought of as a performance artist) who draws money and then tries to exchange his drawings for the face value of the currency drawn. This becomes part of an elaborate system of exchange that opens up questions of our underlying system of exchange--the value of work, of art as commodity etc. The issue is reinforced at a number of places in the syllabus where other artists and shamans such as Mama Lola attempt to reveal reality and even change the world by opening up the roots of issues that may not be overtly confronted by people living in the culture or people being healed. The "ritual walk" exercise usually imbues importance to places in nature for students who begin to notice carefully the environment and how it changes. The 48 hour "silence" exercise really opens up perception (the video of David Frost talking to Maya Angelou really helps make this point).

I added one book this semester to the course--Maureen Korp's Sacred Art of the Earth. In order to do that I had to omit two videos that I used in the past: Koyaanisqatsi and Babbette's Feast. I think there is one too many books in the course, and I am going to think about dropping one of them in the future. It's a difficult choice, because they all work well for some students--I may drop Lame Deer next time so I can work in the 2 videos. Students really like the book--it may be their favorite, but it is a bit repetitive of some earlier issues and material.

This course is a companion to "Myth, Ritual, and the Creative Process" which looks at the "process" of creating worlds of meaning rather than the individuals who create it. I think the Grimes book might fit better into that course.

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